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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 003202

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [RP](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: VATICAN HAND IN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' STATEMENT?

REF: A. MANILA 3187

[TB](#). MANILA 3167
[TC](#). MANILA 3163
[TD](#). MANILA 3161
[TE](#). MANILA 2815

Classified By: Political Officer Andrew McClearn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11.](#) (C) Summary: Several local press reports have claimed that the Papal Nuncio "scolded" the Catholic bishops during their recent conference, demanding that they not involve themselves in politics by explicitly calling for President Arroyo's resignation. As reported, after much discussion, the bishops decided not to demand her resignation. A Church contact told us that the Papal Nuncio did advise the bishops that they should stay clear of political entanglements per Vatican policy, but did not "scold" them in any way. In other news, the Catholic Bishops chose Archbishop Angel Lagdameo to be their next president beginning January 1, 2006. Lagdameo will replace Archbishop Fernando Capalla, who will stay in place until the end of the year. With the end of the Cardinal Sin era, the Church seems to be moving away from political activism towards more of a focus on pastoral matters. End Summary.

A Vatican Hand?

[12.](#) (C) Several local press reports have claimed that the Papal Nuncio "scolded" the Catholic bishops during their July 9-10 annual conference in Manila, demanding that they not involve themselves in politics by explicitly calling for President Arroyo's resignation. (Note: As reported in Reftels, after much discussion, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "CBCP," decided not to demand her resignation, providing Arroyo a needed respite from recent criticism. End Note.) Acting Pol/C spoke July 12 with Bishop Romulo de la Cruz, who attended the conference and asked him about the claims. De la Cruz, who is the bishop for Antique in the central Philippines, confirmed that the Papal Nuncio, Monsignor Antonio Franco, an Italian, addressed the event on July 9, as he and his predecessors have in the past. He said Franco had underscored to the group that it had important matters to discuss and urged the CBCP to be cautious, keeping in mind that it should refrain from political activism per Vatican policy. At no point -- De la Cruz related -- did Franco in any way "scold" the bishops or refer in detail to Philippine domestic politics.

[13.](#) (C) In part because of the Papal Nuncio's comments, De la Cruz said the CBCP statement issued on July 10 noted that: "We are not politicians who are to provide a political blueprint to solve problems...With Pope Benedict XVI we do not believe in the intrusion into politics on the part of the hierarchy." De la Cruz said the vast majority of the bishop's supported Franco's remarks, though several left-leaning bishops -- who were urging that the group take an anti-Arroyo stance -- believed that Franco had "interfered" in the deliberations.

Next Head of the CBCP

[14.](#) (C) Apart from its widely publicized July 10 statement, the CBCP also elected Archbishop Angel Lagdameo to be its next president. Lagdameo will take over the CBCP presidency -- which ranks along with the archbishop positions in Manila and Cebu as among the most important positions in the Church hierarchy -- on January 1, 2006. Lagdameo has been vice president of the CBCP since January 2004. Born in Quezon Province, central Luzon, in 1940, Lagdameo served in Lucena City, Davao, and Cebu City prior to becoming Archbishop of Jaro, Iloilo Province (central Philippines) in 2000. Lagdameo is a friendly and thoughtful person. Conservative on doctrinal issues, he is not a political activist. Archbishop Antonio Ledesma from Iloilo, Zamboanga del Sur Province (Mindanao), was elected vice president of the CBCP, and will take over that position on January 1, 2006.

[15.](#) (SBU) Current CBCP President Archbishop Fernando Capalla

remains in this post until December 31, 2005, when his two-year term ends. Capalla declined to run for another term. The moderate, articulate Capalla will remain Archbishop of Davao, Mindanao. He will also stay on as co-chair of the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC), which promotes inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao. According to observers, the BUC has played a key role in helping reduce inter-religious tensions, with Capalla serving in the forefront of those efforts.

Comment

16. (C) With the end of the Cardinal Sin era, the Church seems to be moving towards more of a focus on pastoral matters. Cardinal Sin, who retired from office in 2003 and died on June 21 (ref E), was very much an activist in the political sphere: he played a key role in the anti-Marcos movement in the 1980s, endorsed and denounced candidates for political office, made declarations on political issues, etc.

Although Sin was close to John Paul II, especially on doctrinal matters, the Vatican was not fully comfortable with his political activities, according to contacts. The Church at this point seems to be in a phase of "Sin-fatigue" and -- based on its July 10 statement -- seems very much open to advice from the Vatican on the need to keep out of politics in a direct way. Despite the apparent shift in the CBCP away from political engagement per se, there is no indication of any change in its views on social issues, such as artificial methods of family planning and Philippine government involvement in that area. In addition, if the political situation deteriorates, the CBCP might take a more activist stance in the future.

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